

Executive Summary

Aiming High is built on the legacy of *Second to None*, California's visionary guideline for high school reform.¹ During the last decade many improvements have been made in California high schools, but continued concern has focused on poor results in student achievement. To spur schools to produce graduates with higher levels of achievement and skills, California educators and policymakers created academic content standards and a statewide assessment system to measure both schools' and individual students' progress in mastery of standards.

These standards are a part of a national movement that is here to stay. The American public demands high standards in every walk of life. Now it is demanding high standards in education. Surveys show that the public's approval rating for standards-based education remains at an all-time high, and 49 of 50 states have responded by adopting academic standards.

The most important point is that standards-based education works. It absolutely *will* raise the achievement of students across the board, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic background. A recent meta-analysis of 53 research studies found that when students were clear in advance about what they were supposed to learn (that is, the standards), their achievement test scores averaged 34 percentile points higher on tests than did the scores of students in control groups.² The question now is how to deliver standards-based education.

Aiming High was written to help the school community grapple with the myriad issues in implementing a standards-based educational system. Among the many issues schools struggle with are how to:

- Create a standards-based school culture.
- Offer appropriate professional development.
- Target the essential standards and local outcomes.
- Design curriculum and pedagogy to maximize mastery of standards and outcomes.
- Align content standards and performance levels with feeder middle schools.
- Ensure that target standards and outcomes are taught and assessed multiple times.
- Provide substantial additional support for students having difficulty mastering the standards or achieving the outcomes.
- Involve families, postsecondary education, and the community in the process.
- Collect, analyze, and use data to ensure continual improvement.

Completing these tasks will result in higher achievement for all students. This achievement, however, is not won by sacrificing a balanced education. A standards-based system does not force schools to focus solely on targeted state academic standards. Focusing only on these standards would not meet the high school's overall mission: to graduate young adults ready for postsecondary education and careers, economic self-sufficiency, and effective citizenship.

In California, state and local assessments work together to measure student achievement. Statewide testing, such as the *Stanford Achievement Test (Ninth Edition)*, *Form T*, the *California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE)*, and *Golden State Examinations*, takes a snapshot in time of student mastery of state standards. Because statewide assessments measure student mastery of academic standards, they are closely related to *preparing students for postsecondary education and careers*.

Local assessments serve as benchmarks of student progress toward meeting state standards. The local assessments ascertain ongoing development of student learning through classroom assessments and

end-of-course outcomes. Because local assessments take place in various contexts, they add dimension to the assessment picture. Local assessments integrate academic content with mastery of career-technical and visual and performing arts standards and other community expectations. Therefore, locally developed assessments allow students to demonstrate real-world skills. Because of their broader context, local assessments are most closely related to preparing students for *economic self-sufficiency and effective citizenship*. These standards and outcomes are interdependent and equally important.

Responding to the national call for student mastery of rigorous standards, the U.S. Department of Education commissioned a nationwide search for high schools that were successfully implementing comprehensive education reform strategies. Through this process the U.S. Department of Education identified 12 characteristics that these vanguard schools had in common. The characteristics that enhance student achievement consistently in secondary schools across America are as follows:

- All the school's core activities concentrate on student learning and achievement.
- All students are expected to master the same rigorous academic content; high expectations are established for student achievement.
- Staff development and planning emphasize student learning and achievement.
- Schools use curricula that are challenging and relevant and cover content in depth.
- Schools use multiple forms of assessment.
- Students receive extra support from adults.
- Students learn about careers and college opportunities through real-life experiences.
- Schools create small, highly personalized, and safe learning environments.
- Students have opportunities to gain computer and other technical skills.
- Periods of instruction are longer and more flexible.
- Strong partnerships are forged with middle schools and colleges.

- Schools form active alliances with families, employers, community members, and policymakers to promote student learning and ensure accountability for results.

These research-based characteristics are discussed in *Aiming High*. Districts and schools moving toward a standards-based educational system will find *Aiming High* a resource for (1) defining what standards and outcomes to address; (2) delineating how to successfully teach and assess standards and outcomes; (3) providing supports to enable students to meet high standards and outcomes; and (4) gathering and using data for continual improvement of the system. The appendix contains a reflection tool to determine a school's progress in implementing a standards-based educational system. Following the appendix is a glossary of terms. Each chapter is described briefly below.

Chapter 1, "Using Standards-Based Education to Raise the Bar," begins with the backdrop of California's new "hourglass" economy. To be economically self-sufficient, students need access to the top of the hourglass—jobs with good pay and the greatest growth rate—but those occupations require significant postsecondary education or training. To remain economically viable in the global economy, the state must meet the labor market requirements and produce employees who think and function at high levels. For this country to survive as a democracy, students must have the skills and knowledge to exercise both the rights and the responsibilities of citizenship.

The chapter explores the concepts and research underlying standards-based education as a method of raising the bar of expectation and achievement for all California students. The chapter also defines a standards-based educational system—what it looks like and how it differs from a traditional system.

Chapter 2, "Understanding Standards, Assessment, and Accountability," guides the reader through standards, tests, and accountability measures and then focuses on how to target a manageable number of key standards.

"High-stakes tests" for schools and students are explained in relation to the state standards, and both mandatory and voluntary tests are analyzed

in terms of helping the school focus on a key set of standards. The standards and outcomes chosen should align with state-mandated assessments, such as *CAHSEE*, and local accountability measures, such as Expected Schoolwide Learning Results.

Chapter 3, “Creating the Context for Standards-Based Education,” focuses on developing a school community culture to support the standards movement. It details the roles of the local school board, district administrators, principal, faculty, and school staff in implementing the standards system and discusses the need for professional development and resources to support the effort.

A section on vertical alignment with feeder middle schools stresses the new importance of ongoing dialogue and coordination between high schools and middle schools because of the high percentage of items on *CAHSEE* that reflect middle school academic content standards.

Chapter 4, “Implementing Standards-Based Instruction and Assessment,” directly addresses the issue of classroom implementation. This chapter offers a step-by-step guide to implementing standards-based instruction and assessment in the classroom, featuring details and examples of five activities:

- Selecting and analyzing standards to be met
- Designing and selecting an assessment by which students can demonstrate mastery of standards
- Identifying what students must know and be able to do to perform well on the assessment
- Planning lessons so all students have opportunities to learn and practice the skills and knowledge
- Examining student work to plan further instruction or support and to grade the work

How to design effective in-class assessments is emphasized because assessment design precedes instruction. A section on grading identifies approaches to reconciling a standards-based educational system with traditional grading practices.

Chapter 5, “Initiating Instruction and Assessment of Local Outcomes,” reinforces the principle that local outcomes and the state academic content standards together form the cornerstone of school improvement. The chapter provides strategies for creating a context for instruction and assessment. It also identifies four categories of local outcomes: curriculum standards, end-of-course outcomes, graduation requirements, and Expected Schoolwide Learning Results.

Chapter 6, “Supporting Student Academic Success,” presents an array of academic supports that high schools may implement to ensure students’ opportunity to learn, institutionalize equity, and maximize student achievement. The understanding that all students can learn at high levels is rooted in research and is absolutely essential to a standards-based educational system. To translate this concept into reality, schools must provide extra help to students who are at risk of not meeting standards, help that often requires reallocating resources and redirecting teacher time. Details and examples are provided for many strategies, including tutorials within the school day, distance learning, and embedded support.

Chapter 7, “Creating Structural Supports for Student Success,” presents ways of increasing the bonds between students and the school. Strategies include student-led conferences or exhibitions, advisories, and *looping* (the practice of assigning a teacher to the same group of students as they progress to the next grade level). A section on alternative scheduling discusses the advantages and disadvantages of various scheduling options. Because implementing standards in the classroom usually requires an enormous investment of staff time to craft new lesson and unit plans, assessments, and reporting systems, this section discusses how to ensure regular time for collaborative planning.

Chapter 8, “Promoting Family and Community Supports for Student Success,” presents the components of a family and community support system that helps all students master rigorous standards and outcomes. Schools can choose from options to make “families as partners” a reality, not just a slogan, and bring in community organizations and businesses to support the effort. A section on developing strong partnerships with colleges and universities features strategies and resources to support increased student academic achievement and higher education aspirations.

Chapter 9, “Developing Academic Literacy for Student Success,” focuses on the special needs of the more than 1.5 million English learners in the schools and other needs of students unprepared for the more demanding academic literacy. This section discusses English-language development standards and courses as well as techniques to assist English learners in attaining academic literacy and proficiency in targeted standards.

Chapter 10, “Using Data for Continual Improvement,” reviews the types of data schools can gather, the need for data disaggregation, approaches to data analysis, and strategies for using findings to continually improve schools. Using various data to document the results of systemic reform—and adjusting programs in light of the results—is absolutely essential.

Aiming High outlines a plan for raising student achievement and integrating standards-based education in a rapidly changing world. State accountability requirements, local outcomes, and educational research findings enable educators to design an educational system that fits local needs and supports student success, staff engagement, and stakeholder involvement.

In *The Long Boom*, Peter Schwartz says that *all* young people “will have to become veritable learning animals [as] learning is everyone’s only chance. An individual has no choice but to learn and to learn fast.”³ How high must the bar be raised? How much will students need to learn to be competitive in this new world economy?

And who are students’ guides on this learning journey? If not educators, then who? If not now, when?

Notes

1. *Second to None: A Vision of the New California High School*. Report of the California High School Task Force. Sacramento: California Department of Education, 1992.
2. Robert J. Marzano, *A Theory-Based Meta-Analysis of the Research on Instruction*. Aurora, Colo.: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 1998. Available on the Web site <<http://www.mcrel.org/products/learning/meta.pdf>>.
3. Peter Schwartz and others, *The Long Boom: A Vision for the Coming Age of Prosperity*. New York: Perseus Books, 1999, p. 269.